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## **Distance in language: grounding a metaphor (introduction)**

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The conceptual metaphor of distance plays a crucial role in current perceptions of the world and humans' various interactions within it. It hardly seems possible to conceptualize space and time, emotional involvement in events, and relationships with other people in terms other than "distance". As a consequence, this primarily spatial concept figures prominently in the verbal expression of these abstract notions, and is thus highly relevant for the analysis of linguistic phenomena. In recent decades, "distance" has been employed as a fruitful tool in different, primarily cognitive and functional, approaches. However, the explanatory power of this notion suffers from certain inconsistencies: On the one hand, very different linguistic phenomena are described in terms of "distance", while, on the other, the notion itself relates to disparate concepts.

By providing a thorough grounding of the metaphor of distance, the present volume makes this notion tangible and thus applicable in various domains of linguistic analysis. The contributions gathered in this volume provide a concise delimitation from neighbouring concepts, and explore the rich potential of this metaphor for the analysis of the semantics, usage conditions and discourse-pragmatic effects of both morpho-syntactic categories and syntactic structures. They also investigate the role of "distance" in understanding mechanisms of linguistic interaction. The languages covered in this volume include, amongst others, languages from the Germanic, Romance and Slavic families, as well as Japanese and Turkish.

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Distance in Language

Barbara Sonnenhauser  
Anastasia Meermann

# Distance in Language

*Grounding a Metaphor*



*Edited by*  
**Barbara Sonnenhauser and Anastasia Meermann**



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Distance in Language: Grounding a Metaphor

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## INTRODUCTION

### DISTANCE IN LANGUAGE: GROUNDING A METAPHOR

[t]he universal semantic prime, if we choose to speak in such terms, is in the final analysis the spatial concept of ‘distance’ (Fleischman 1989, 38)<sup>1</sup>

The spatial notion of ‘distance’, which Fleischman (see quote above) ascribes the status of a semantic primitive, has been applied in linguistic analysis in a range of domains. It has been used to account for the semantics and function of morphosyntactic categories, to explain the usage of these categories at the text level—e.g. as regards the introduction of viewpoints and the structuring of texts—and to shed light on mechanisms of linguistic interaction. This broad coverage suggests that ‘distance’ figures as a basic conceptual metaphor, which helps to structure “what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 454).<sup>2</sup> It hardly seems possible to conceptualize, e.g., time, the emotional involvement in certain events or relationships to other people in other than in terms of ‘distance’. At the same time, this spatial metaphor is used to verbally express these temporal, emotional and social concepts.

Even though the notion of distance is adduced in accounting for various linguistic phenomena, it has predominantly been applied in an intuitive way. Thus, its usage is by no means consistent and its potential for the description and explanation of linguistic categories, structures and behavior has not yet been elucidated in all its facets. This diversity in usage and interpretation can be ascribed to the fact that the underlying metaphor is not explicitly defined. However, only if the (non-linguistic) source domain components are specified as well as the way they may be

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<sup>1</sup> Fleischman, Suzanne. 1989. Temporal distance: a basic linguistic metaphor. *Studies in language* 13(1), 1–50.

<sup>2</sup> Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. Conceptual metaphor in everyday language. *The Journal of Philosophy* 77(8), 453–486.

transferred to the (linguistic) target domain and applied in the analysis of linguistic phenomena, can the notion of distance display its manifold benefits. With other words: it is necessary to determine the manifestation of the components of this metaphor in language as well as the specific linguistic phenomena serving the expression of distance on various levels of language. Both aspects are central to the papers gathered in this volume. They aim at contributing to a more precise understanding of the nature of ‘distance’ and the ways it may be used to account for linguistic phenomena at the levels of grammar, text and interaction.

Striving for a more precise understanding of ‘distance’, the papers in **Part I** are concerned with the components of distance and their relevance to the various manifestations of this metaphor. Sonja Zeman’s contribution on *The elementary particles of distance in space, time, grammar and discourse* elaborates a unifying taxonomy in order to account for different phenomena of distance both at the level of the language system and at the discourse level. Analysing spatial and temporal localization she shows distance to be a fundamental and ubiquitous relationship underlying linguistic perspectivization and conceptualization in general. This suggests that distance cannot be regarded as a category by itself, but rather as a basic relation which forms an ultimate constituent of linguistic substance in the sense of an elementary particle.

Anastasia Meermann and Barbara Sonnenhauser pursue a twofold goal in their paper on *Distance: between deixis and perspectivity*. Discussing exemplary applications of the notion of distance in linguistic analysis, they show that this notion is used to describe phenomena located at different levels of language and linguistic analysis. Aiming to overcome the problems arising from this mixup, they differentiate in a first step between deixis, distance and perspectivity and illustrate how these notions are interrelated. In a second step, they apply these notions to the analysis of the Balkan Slavic preterit system.

**Part II** is concerned with the manifestations of distance at the morpho-syntactic level, both in the nominal and in the verbal domain. Evangelia Adamou’s paper *Distance in tensed nominals: a typological perspective* focuses on the mapping of distance in space and its temporal expression by ‘overt nominal tense’, a comparatively rare and still under-studied phenomenon. Languages that encode time in terms of distal noun determiners indicate that there is not a one-to-one relationship between the distance in space and past or future reference. Rather, in tensed nominals, distal reference in space is associated with distal reference in time from the ‘here and now’ situation, be it in the past or the future.



In her paper *Truncated perfect in Serbian—a distance marker?*, Anastasia Meermann looks into the drop of the auxiliary in the Serbian perfect, aiming to explore the function of such ‘truncated’ perfect forms at the discourse level. Her analysis, which is based on data from colloquial Serbian, shows that the truncated perfect encodes several meanings, which are similar to those expressed by the Balkan Slavic evidential forms, and which can be ascribed to the primary function of ‘distancing’.

Barbara Sonnenhauser’s contribution *Hear-say, inference, surprise: (self-)distancing in Bulgarian* probes into the semantic basis of the notion of ‘distance’ and applies it to the analysis of the semantics and the interpretational range of Bulgarian perfect-like forms. She shows how the metaphor of distance can be semantically grounded and how it manifests itself in the verbal forms under consideration. The various interpretations and functions of the perfect-like forms are derived by the contextual specification of the components of the underlying distance relationship.

The papers in **Part III** focus on manifestations of distance at the text level. The interrelation between space and discourse as evinced in the usage of demonstrative expressions indicating spatial and temporal relationships as well as relationships at the text level is the starting point for Imke Mendoza’s paper on *Distance in discourse. Evidence from Polish, Russian and German*. She shows that two spatial dimensions of distance need to be assumed: distance between two linguistic expressions, and metaphorical (i.e. temporal or emotional) distance between the observer and the referent of the antecedent of an anaphoric expression. These dimensions are reflected differently in adnominal and pronominal demonstratives, which indicates that the basic deictic opposition ‘proximity vs. distance’ cannot be mapped directly from space to discourse.

In his paper *Ignorance of epistemological distance: rhetorical use of non-evidentials in the work of Franz Kafka* Yoshinori Nishijima deals with utterances with which the speaker expresses what his or her interlocutor thinks, as if ‘seeing through’ their mind. Even though such utterances are grammatical, they are pragmatically strange because they ignore the personal epistemological distance between the speaker and the hearer. In Kafka’s novels, however, such utterances are observed occasionally. They are compared with their translations into Japanese, a language with strong evidential constraints.

Maksim Makartsev’s contribution on *Evidentials in Balkan Slavic as a text-structuring device* investigates the usage of evidential forms in a certain type of folklore text in the Balkan Slavic languages. Based on this investigation he arrives at the conclusion that within these texts, evidential forms can be understood as being part of a ‘secondary modelling system’.

Distance expressed by evidential forms becomes a semiotic device for shaping the structure of the text and for highlighting certain points in it.

Linguistic interaction as another manifestation of distance is dealt with by the contributions in **Part IV**. In her paper *Triangulations: navigating distance in interaction*, Grace Fielder applies the concept of ‘triangulation’ to illustrate how the Bulgarian adversative discourse connectives *ami* and *ama*, both of which can be translated by English *but*, are used indexically to position interlocutors in interactional, reflexive discourse space. Through the choice of discourse connective, the speaker triangulates her position (or that of another) along a continuum of proximal versus distal. Based on the underlying cognitive spatial notion of distance the relationships between participants are mapped.

Liljana Mitkovsa, Eleni Bužarovska and Marija Kusevska’s contribution on *Macedonian ‘da ne’-questions as distance markers* looks into the discourse functions of Macedonian constructions such as *Da ne ti e lošo?* ‘You aren’t feeling very well, are you?’. Because they do not impose anything directly, questions containing the interrogative epistemic marker *da ne* seem to evoke politeness. It turns out that *da ne*-questions are used felicitously in situations where interlocutors understand the entailed discourse presuppositions. Being characterized by solidarity and closeness, *da ne*-questions serve as markers of positive politeness and are employed by speakers to indicate small horizontal distance.

In her paper on *The concept of privacy and proxemic differences*, Galina Putjata proposes a meta-analysis of the relationship between the existence of spatial and temporal concepts in the lexico-semantic domain of a language and the nonverbal behavior of speakers. The analysis focuses on one spatial concept that has been neglected in the linguistic research so far: the concept of privacy. In an attempt to help reduce this lacuna, her study concentrates on three language communities—Slavic, Romance and Germanic—and investigates if a significantly deviating concept of privacy results in substantial nonverbal differences.

The present volume goes back to the conference *Distance in language—language of distance*, held at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, April 5–6 2013. We sincerely thank the *German Research Foundation* for funding the conference (project number SO 949/2–1), and Nicole Beaven and Rouja Iossifova for their assistance in editing this volume.

Munich/Vienna, December 2014  
Barbara Sonnenhauser and Anastasia Meermann